

Hindu religion as the 'complementary/incommensurable other' to Christian religion^{*}

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INTRODUCTION

Few Christian authors have reflected upon and written about the dogma of the Trinity as much as Saint Augustine, at the turn of the 4th and 5th centuries. In *The City of God* (11, 26), he writes that we bear within ourselves the image of the Trinity in the form of a triple certitude. This is how he formulates his idea: "For we are and know that we are and delight in being and knowing it. Moreover, in these three things that I said, no true-seeming illusion disturbs us."¹ Further on, he adds: "...without delusive representation of any image or phantasm, it is absolutely certain for me that I am, that I know it and that I delight in it."²

No doubt numerous commentaries could be made about this profound intuition. I think it very eloquently shows that a theological or metaphysical truth, whatever it may be, cannot be comprehended unless we—in one way or another—bear it within ourselves. But what immediately strikes a specialist of India such as myself—and I willingly imagine that the Hindus themselves would have the same "reflex"—is, according to this approach, the remarkable similarity between the Christian Trinity and the Upanishadic ternary *saccidānanda*.

The certitude of being is *sat*; the certitude of the awareness of being is *cit*; the certitude of the love of this being and of this awareness of being is *ānanda*. It seems difficult to find a more perfect coincidence of concept and even of formulation between the Christian Trinity and the Upanishadic ternary.

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¹*Nam et sumus et nos esse nouimus et id esse ac nosse diligimus. In his autem tribus, quae dixi, nulla nos falsitas ueri similis turbat.*

²*Sed sine ulla phantasiarum uel phantasmatum imaginatione ludificatoria mihi esse me idque nosse et amare certissimum est.*

An orientalist or a Hindu who is well-acquainted with the Christian religion could immediately argue that the Christian Trinity and the Upanishadic ternary are two fundamentally different things. The triple concept of *saccidānanda* probably appears for the first time in the *Māṇḍukyopaniṣad*, one of the eleven principal *Upaniṣad* commented on by Śaṅkara. It is applied to the third state of the *ātman* (the Self) considered in relation to a human being. This state is associated with deep sleep (*susupta-sthāna*). It is also differentiated from the fourth state of the *ātman*, which alone is perfectly identical to *brahman*, the undifferentiated absolute (*nirviśeṣa*).

Of course, if we further extend this analysis of the concept of *saccidānanda* in its Upanishadic context, it becomes more and more delicate to maintain a precise and pertinent connection with the Christian Trinity. One gets rapidly lost in approximate equivalences. The unavoidable risk is to distort a sound and fruitful perception of the particularities of the different traditions. The point of convergence of these traditions is in their fundamental intuitions and not in the sophistication of theological or philosophical discourses.

The difficulty created by comparisons of this sort was especially strongly felt by René Guénon. In *The Great Triad*, he gives a strict warning against any hasty and approximate mixture of ternaries taken from different traditions. In a footnote, however, he concedes that “Of the various different ternaries envisaged in Hindu tradition, perhaps the one that could in certain respects most valuably be compared with the Christian Trinity (although naturally the point of view will still be very different) is the ternary *Sat-Chit-Ānanda*.” Thus, he concludes, as I have done, that in spite of different “points of view”, a comparison is nonetheless possible. And in another of his works, *Man and his Becoming according to the Vedānta*, he goes even further. He elucidates the Hindu ternary by means of a key borrowed from Sufism: “In Arabic we have, as equivalents of these three terms [*saccidānanda*], Intelligence (*al-‘aql*), the Intelligent (*al-‘āqil*) and the Intelligible (*al-ma‘qūl*): the first term is Universal Consciousness (*Chit*), the second is its subject (*Sat*), and the third is its object (*Ānanda*), the three being but one in Being ‘which knows Itself by Itself’.”

THE DOCTRINE OF THE AVATAR

Thus, bridges do exist from one tradition to another and it seems obvious to me that if Augustine could have known about the Upanishadic ternary he would have attempted to interpret it with the keys of his own tradition and on the basis of his personal intuition, as Guénon did with Sufism.

But now I would like to express a few thoughts about another remarkable point of convergence between Hinduism and Christianity, namely the notion of avatar. We know that the avatar, the *avatāra*, from the root *ava-TR*, to descend, is literally a “descent”, completely voluntary and not determined by a karmic chain, of a divinity to earth. This descent is provoked by a necessity of a cosmic order, as brought out in the *Bhagavad-gītā* (4:7): “O descendant of Bharata, every time the *dharma* declines and the *adharma*

risers, I manifest Myself.” Although it initially appeared in the Vishnuite context of the *Bhagavad-gītā* and in connection with the figure of Kṛṣṇa, this possibility of divine manifestation was subsequently extended to all the divinities of the pantheon.

In fact, in the *Mahābhārata*, all the heroes stem from Vedic divinities, even if they acquire a new personality in the epic. However, the case of Kṛṣṇa introduces a distinctive feature. He is also the epic representative of a Vedic divinity, namely Viṣṇu who in the *Ṛg-veda* is a companion, a kind of lieutenant, of Indra. But Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa is intended to play a new role in the epic, distinct from his role in the *Veda*. In the epic, he comes to represent the supreme divinity, unconditioned, the *brahman* of the *Upaniṣad*. As Arjuna says, addressing him: “Thou art the supreme *brahman*, the supreme abode, the supreme purifier, the eternal, divine Puruṣa, the primal divinity, the unborn, the omnipresent” (*BG* 10:12).³

Mythologists, led by Dumézil, have emphasized the fact that the *Mahābhārata* was essentially a typical product of Indo-European culture. Moreover, its kinship with the *Iliad* is obvious. But it seems that none of the Indo-European epics that present semi-divine heroes introduce the concept of a plenary “descent” of the ultimate divine Reality. In any case, one would seek in vain an equivalent of Kṛṣṇa in the context of the *Iliad*.

By definition, the *Mahābhārata* falls within the province of what India calls *smṛti*, the Tradition. In this way it is not different from other Indo-European epics, which similarly transmit an ancient corpus of myths and legends to posterity. But unlike these various epics, the *Mahābhārata* contains at its core a kernel that falls within the province of *śruti*, Revelation, namely the *Bhagavad-gītā*. This traditional distinction between *smṛti* and *śruti* may appear artificial to an external observer. However, it plays an important role in Indian consciousness, which conceives the philosophical dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna as an essential key to the comprehension of the epic as a whole. One may of course discuss the special status of the *Bhagavad-gītā* in relation to the *Mahābhārata*, as many orientalist have already done and continue to do so: indeed, many of them consider the *Gītā* to be a late addition to the epic. But, however that may be, the *Mahābhārata* would not have played such an important role in the Indian religious consciousness without the *Bhagavad-gītā*. It is the *Bhagavad-gītā* that assures the permanence of the *Mahābhārata*, and has made it the monument that it is. Although it may be daring or risky to express oneself in this way, one can say that it is due to the lack of a similar key that the *Iliad* and the other Indo-European epics have not given rise to an enduring religion, as the *Mahābhārata* has done with *bhakti*.

THE CHRISTIAN PARALLEL

In the absence of an explicitly mentioned descent to earth of the supreme divinity in the rest of the Indo-European world, it is toward Christianity that one must turn to find a truly remarkable parallel of this doctrine. And —it should be added— that one must turn

³*Paraṃ brahma paraṃ dhāma pavitraṃ paramaṃ bhavān / puruṣaṃ śāśvataṃ divyam ādidevam ajaṃ vibhum.*

toward Christianity to the exclusion of the other Abrahamic religions. The analogies between the avataric figure of Kṛṣṇa and the person of Jesus as divine Incarnation and member of the Trinity are in fact astonishing. For Jesus is equally a descent of God to earth, as the *Credo* bears witness: *qui propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem descendit de caelis* (cf. John 6:33, *panis enim Dei est qui de caelo descendit*).

Comparisons between the figures of Kṛṣṇa and Jesus are scarcely found in the modern specialist literature on India. The only attempts at rapprochements of this type —once the studies of the pioneers of Orientalism, the occultist literature and that of the New Age have been excluded— are those found in the Perennialist school, that is to say in the works of authors such as A. K. Coomaraswamy, René Guénon or Frithjof Schuon. But what interests me here first and foremost is that with respect to the notion of avatar, we have a striking example of the double polarity which is the object of my talk: the *complementary other* and the *incommensurable other*. On the one hand, India has always understood the figure of Jesus as *complementary other*. In a very general way, Hindus consider Jesus to be an avatar. The following quote from *Rāmakṛṣṇa* bears witness to this: “*The Avatar is always the same. The One God plunges into the ocean of life, incarnates and his name is Krishna. At another time he plunges, comes up in another place amongst humanity and his name is Jesus.*” This standpoint is justified on two counts. First of all, by admitting that Viṣṇu has incarnated himself an incalculable number of times to respond to all sorts of diverse needs, India has so to speak become familiar with the qualitative and quantitative multiplicity of the avataric phenomenon. Then, as it has done with the Buddha, another historical person equally accepted by the Vishnuites as an avatar, thanks to this doctrine it possesses a simple means of resolving the potential problem of an external threat: it pays “tribute” to the most eloquent manifestations of the divine which are produced outside of its habitual framework, while simultaneously safeguarding its own doctrinal hegemony. In this situation, integration proves to be a much more certain means of maintaining supremacy than exclusion.

On the other hand, from the Christian point of view, there is an opposite phenomenon that falls within the province of the *incommensurable other*. For the immense majority of the faithful, as well as for the theologians who enunciate the dogma, Kṛṣṇa can in no way be considered to be an Incarnation of God on earth. In the first place, Kṛṣṇa, unlike Jesus, is not a historical figure. Consequently, in the Christian imaginary world he cannot have the same degree of reality as Jesus. Only the latter is truly the Word made flesh: *Verbum caro factum est*. A mythological figure could not possess this capacity.⁴ Then, and this shocks Christian sensibility, Kṛṣṇa goes through the vicissitudes of the world with an almost insolent ease. He has no Passion to undergo; he does not suffer, does not sweat blood and tears. In other words, for Christians he does not seem to participate in the

⁴It may be said in passing that this aspect of things is associated with an important element of difference between the Indian and Occidental civilizations, which is hardly questioned by the specialists: the relationship to factual history differs completely between India and Europe. In the Sanskrit literature, one would search in vain for a Thucydides or a Livy.

destiny of men in “their valley of tears”. In addition, we may mention that he does not have to pay their redemption by a sacrifice; he does not rise from the dead etc.⁵

I do not believe that a well-grounded comparative study of Kṛṣṇa and Jesus has already been made, for in addition to the obvious differences just mentioned, there are some curious coincidences between the two figures. They are both born of royal ancestry, at midnight and in secret; they both give rise to a massacre of innocents, they both have an adoptive father, are taken in by shepherds, etc. Finally, they are both to return to earth to judge: Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa in the form of Kalkyavatāra, sword unsheathed to reward the good and punish the wicked; as for Jesus: *iterum uenturus est cum gloria iudicare uiuos et mortuos (Credo)*. There is beyond doubt material for a substantial piece of work for anyone who would like to look into these mythological and theological convergences, but this is not the place for me to dwell upon this aspect of things.

SAME CAUSES, SAME EFFECTS

The two attitudes toward the notion of avatar which I have just described, that is to say inclusion through accentuation of similarities, and exclusion through accentuation of differences, have a kind of “historical reality” in the sense that they belong to the history of mankind and of civilizations. For that is indeed how, on the one hand, Hindus have generally perceived Christ and, on the other hand, if need be (but more rarely), the Christians have perceived and judged Kṛṣṇa. Now, one cannot “remake history”, but the discipline of comparative religion allows us to see other not less interesting analogies and divergences. I think that is how one can go beyond a binary opposition between the *complementary other* and the *incommensurable other*.

Here are some points of reflection, first of all for analogies. The notion of avatar, like that of incarnation, implies that God becomes a Person and is no longer solely a Principle. This change of perspective has numerous consequences, and the development of the Hindu religion (or religions) and of Christianity (or of the Christian religions) presents some perfect analogies. The following are the principal ones:

- God having become man, He becomes representable. Previously, as seen in the Old Testament, all imagery of God is impossible and therefore prohibited. However, as soon as an avatar or a divine incarnation appears, with in some way the mission to remind man that he is made in the image of God, God becomes “officially” representable for man and the form of worship becomes iconic (expression from M. Angot). Except for the special case of Protestantism (which I will return to further on), Hinduism on the one hand and Christianity on the other give the worship of images a central position.

- As Principle, God is knowable. Such is the foundation of a path of knowledge. But as Person, He is lovable. Such is the foundation of a path of devotion or of love. The

⁵If the Hindu avatic phenomenon belongs to the incommensurable other for ordinary Christians, one can nevertheless ask what Dante really wanted to say by describing the “solar” birth of Francis of Assisi: *Di questa costa, là dov'ella frange / più sua rattezza, nacque al mondo un sole, / come fa questo tal volta di Gange (Paradiso, 11, 49–51): Out of this hillside... to the world was born a sun, as this one (?) sometimes is out of Ganges.*

appearance of an avatar or a divine incarnation necessarily implies an emphasis on a path of love. This is very exactly the teaching of the *Bhagavad-gītā*, in particular at the beginning of chapter 12. In response to a question by Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa asserts in plain language the primacy of *bhakti-yoga* over *jñāna-yoga*, reputed to be “difficult”. This primacy is however a sign of the times. It is connected with mankind’s entry into the final age of its history, the *kali-yuga*. After the *Bhagavad-gītā* and the *Mahābhārata*, the Vedic religion, principally based on a sacrificial path, that of *karma-yoga*, is above all taken as a religion of the previous age, that of the *dvāpara-yuga*.

- I said above that if God took human form at any given moment of history it was, among other things, in order to “remind man that he was created in the image of God”. This idea of “reminder” is essential. The entire chapter 12 of the *Bhagavad-gītā*, which I just cited, is permeated with the idea that the path of *bhakti* implies perfect concentration on the person of the avatar. Vishnuism, and subsequently Krishnaism, incessantly accentuate this idea of the remembrance of God, *smaraṇa*. One also distinguishes between *rūpa-smaraṇa*, remembrance based on the contemplation of an image, *līlā-smaraṇa*, remembrance based on a meditation upon the acts of the avatar, and *nāma-smaraṇa*, remembrance based on the repetition of a name of the avatar. The repetition of the name of the avatar is the basis for *japa-yoga*, the continuous invocation of the avatar. Now this invocatory practice, at the heart of Hinduism as well as at the heart of Christianity, is without a doubt that which most intimately establishes a parallel between the two traditions, beyond any opposition between *complementary other* and *incommensurable other*.

A final remark: this triple typology of the remembrance of God as formulated by Hinduism can provide a key to the interpretation of certain differences between Christian denominations. *Rūpa-smaraṇa*, remembrance through worship of an image, is especially typical of Orthodox Christianity. The importance given by this religious tradition to the veneration of icons is well-known. And worship of images, although a bit less ritualized, is also characteristic of Catholicism. In contrast, Protestantism, as if nostalgic for the Biblical world, rejects images. That is why it accentuates the remembrance of God in meditation on the acts of the avatar, *līlā-smaraṇa*. This also explains why reading and knowledge of the Gospel assume such importance in Protestantism.

WHY LOVE THE AVATAR?

Descended among men, the avatar is not content “to be there”, even if his presence alone is recognized as a blessing for the world, whether men acknowledge him as a divine incarnation, or they are unaware of him, or they hate him. The avatar experiences not only birth and death, like ordinary mortals, but he acts and speaks as well. The least of his acts and the least of his sayings contain teaching for mankind. Certainly, Kṛṣṇa as well as Jesus made enemies for themselves. But they have, each of them, been sufficiently convincing that their teachings were passed on to posterity and founded a religion.

One can ask oneself about the origin, or if you will, about the secret of their power of seduction. Rūpa Gosvāmī (end of 15th–beginning of 16th century), the disciple of the Bengali Saint Caitanya (1486-1533?), responds in his own way to this question. In his *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*, *The Ocean of Nectar of the Flavours of Devotion*, written by order of his master, he describes in minute detail the mystical experience of the *bhakta*, the devotees, of Krishnaism. What is very original in this work is that the author treats his subject starting from the fundamental notions of Indian rhetoric, as defined by Bharata about one thousand years earlier (!) in his famous *Nāṭya-śāstra* or *Treatise on the Theatre*. In this way, Rūpa Gosvāmī makes mysticism an art, and as a corollary he makes art a mysticism. To quote Coomaraswamy: “Religion and art are thus names for one and the same experience—an intuition of reality and of identity.”

Making an art of mysticism is to say that God (in this case Kṛṣṇa whom the disciples of Caitanya considered to be the supreme divinity, above Viṣṇu himself, and thus their designation as Krishnaites), is “tasted” by the devotee. Just as the aesthete (the *rasika*, the taster) tastes a work of art, bearer of the eight or nine fundamental flavours of rhetoric, the devotee ecstatically tastes the divine reality. Here I cannot enter into the detail of Rūpa’s demonstration. But what is of interest for our subject is that Kṛṣṇa is conceived as *vibhāva* or the causal state (*i.e.* the determinant) suitable to generate all the flavours of devotion. In art, the *vibhāva* are variable and innumerable. For example, the wonderful flavour (*adbhuta*) can be generated by a divine apparition, by the discovery of a garden or a palace, a magical atmosphere, etc. As for the erotic flavour (*śṛṅgāra*), it can be generated by a place favourable for love, by fine garments, by a situation of sorrowful separation, and so on. Bharata deals with all of this in detail. But on this point, Rūpa has a simplified task: the only *vibhāva* he has to deal with, the one and only cause of the ecstatic rapture of the devotee is Kṛṣṇa himself. Thus, he embarks upon an interminable physical, moral, symbolical and theological description of the avatar, with the idea of arousing the ecstatic love of the *bhakta* or, perhaps even better, to work upon his imagination to give him reasons to love the avatar. Thus he at first enumerates sixty-four human or divine qualities of Kṛṣṇa. These are his intrinsic qualities, that is to say the qualities that the avatar possesses at all times. Then Rūpa goes on to the extrinsic qualities of the avatar, which are those manifested in particular situations or in the different ages of his life. Finally he also dwells on the attributes of Kṛṣṇa, such as his flute, his make-up and his jewellery. All of this occupies 384 verses (or *śloka*), which is about fifty pages in translation.

Some reflections about *the complementary other* and *the incommensurable other*, with respect to Jesus and to Kṛṣṇa could naturally start from the portrait of Kṛṣṇa made by Rūpa. Jesus is loved because he humbled himself in the manger, because he loved little children, condemned hypocrisy, advocated pardon, gave his life on the cross, and so on, for all the reasons one would like. But what could a good Christian think of an avatar who, like Kṛṣṇa, disguises himself as a woman during an erotic game, to the point of “accidentally” seducing his own friend Uddhava who happens to pass by? It

is by touches such as these that one measures the typological gap between Jesus and Kṛṣṇa, and consequently that between Hindu and Christian religious sensibilities.

Kṛṣṇa is a seductive avatar who marries 16,108 women. The *Kṛṣṇopaniṣad* says that they represent the verses of the *R̥g-veda*. Even the crudest eroticism always has a symbolic value in India. The fact remains that here one is in the midst of the *incommensurable other*. Rūpa Gosvāmī also notes the fact that the avatar shows himself to be boastful, if not disgraceful, in certain circumstances. He is cunning (and even a liar in the *Mahābhārata*). He loves practical jokes, to the point of hiding the saris of the *gopī* who are bathing in the river in order to make them show themselves naked. To my knowledge, the Gospel does not report any jokes by Jesus, and as Baudelaire remarks—in a very Christian manner—one does not laugh in Paradise. For if laughter is a characteristic of man, it is a characteristic of *fallen* man.

In brief, in the abundance of descriptions provided by Rūpa, there is sufficient material to paint a picturesque portrait which could only shock a right-minded Christian, who would be highly unlikely to accept the genuineness of a divine incarnation engaging in such behaviour.

CONCLUSION

I have comparatively examined the Hindu tradition and the Christian tradition from a particular angle, that of their common doctrine of a descent of the divinity to earth. Having done that, I have brought to light as many remarkable points of convergence as differences of emphasis, of sensibility; in a word, differences of points of view. The results seem to me rather clear. The more one relies on what I would call metaphysical “intuition”, free from denominational constraints, the more one is tempted to see what these two traditions have in common. The more one concentrates on the details of theological speculations, which are anxious to construct safeguards against heretical excesses, the more one is tempted to see differences. Metaphysics *contra* theology: it is the eternal conflict between the spirit and the letter. But, in substance, there is no choice to make: one only has to put everything in its proper place.



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